

The Office Boy Years

Just before my father died and just before the invading Greater London authorities destroyed our blissful bit of Surrey I made up my mind to get out of the terrible school I was at. Driven nearly to despair by the school's dismissive and penny pinching attitude toward the education of working class children I decided that I could get a better education working in a job.

I searched the advertisements in the newspaper, found something interesting, went for the interview, got the job offer and made the arrangements with my parents and teachers. So it was settled. I could start full time work on the Monday morning. I would be paid £8 per week and spend a significant bit of that on bus and train fares while commuting into and out of the city each day. Nevertheless, it was a start.

When Monday morning came I had to make a bus journey to Morden underground station, the southernmost extremity of London's network of underground train lines, then a lengthy journey on the underground train into London proper.

I arrived at Charing Cross station (renamed, since then, as 'Embankment') and walked the remaining distance up to Fleet Street.

My employers were to be "News Ltd. of Australia", part of Rupert Murdoch's growing global network of news agencies. The office was on the third floor of Keystone House which was in Red Lion Court, a little side passage of Fleet Street. Here's a picture of Red Lion Court as it looks many years later. The phone box is the same. The old buildings have been remodeled a bit.



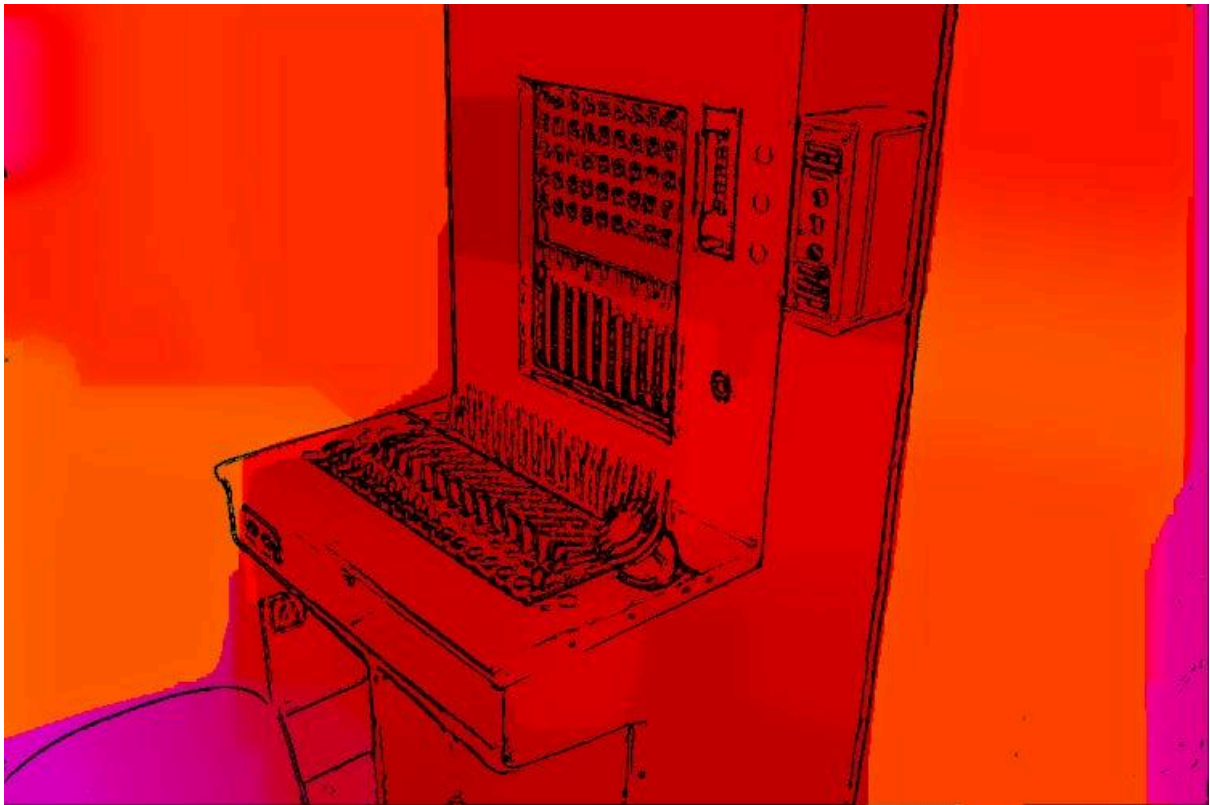
Keystone House was a very old building with an ancient elevator of the 'wire cage' variety which whirred and clanked up between the spirals of the crumbling old staircase to the first, second and third floors.



The ground and first floors belonged to the Keystone Press Agency, the second floor to an advertising agent and the third floor was News Ltd., staffed usually by 7 or 8 people including Mister Peter Gladwin, the London Editor, and author of 'The Desert in the Heart' a novel of hard life in an Australian mining town, Mister Gladwin's secretary Margaret Taylor, office manager Jean Dwyer, 3 or 4 Australian journalists who were semi-permanently based in London and me, the new office boy.

My work included

1. Sitting at the reception desk, greeting anyone who came through the door
2. Answering the telephone switchboard (one of the old 'dollseye' kind), "Hello, News Limited!"
3. Keeping files of Australian newspapers when they arrived by seamail, The Australian, The Sydney Daily Mirror, The Sydney Sunday Mirror etc.
4. Making coffee for the journalists and,
5. Most important of all, I was to be sent out of the office several times each day on errands of one sort or another.



These errands were often collecting press releases. In those days without the internet or email press releases had to be collected by hand and I was sent to places all over London where news was happening or where information was available about news.

I was sent to important places like Australia House, South Africa House, The American Embassy, Ten Downing Street, The Inner Temple, The Old Bailey etc. I was also sent to the homes and offices of authors to collect books to be reviewed in the newspapers. I was sent to Orme Court to collect an advance copy of a book by Spike Milligan. My memory gets a bit vague in places. I have a glitchy brain and some memories are slightly wrong. I'm writing this in July 2024 at the age of nearly 71.

I sort of remember that the book I collected from Orme Court was "The Goon Show Scripts" but that book didn't come out until 1972 and I finished working for News Ltd. in 1971. I don't think the book could have been a whole year in advance of publication so the book I collected and delivered back to News Ltd in Keystone House must have been "Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall" which *did* come out in 1971. I always have to struggle to correctly remember the details of things from years ago. When I was a little boy at junior school the teachers used to call me the "absent minded professor" so my brain was a bit glitchy even then.

I was sent to TV presenter Robin Day's house to collect a packaged book from him but, checking the internet, I can see that Robin Day didn't publish any book at all during the years 1969 to 1971 when I was doing the office boy job so I don't know what book it was that I collected from him.

I changed during those years. In 1969 I was a 15 year old schoolboy starting work in a new job. I had short hair and a suit. By 1971 I had transformed into a long haired teenager with a

little bit of blond hair beginning to grow on my chin and the sides of my face. They sent me to Ten Downing Street on two occasions to collect the Honours Lists. These collections involved showing my identification to the policeman on the door and being allowed in to the front hallway of Number Ten to sign for a copy of the Honours List from a stack of identical ones on a small table. The second time I went there I was wearing a lapel badge which said "I am an enemy of the state" but the policeman still let me go in.

Downing Street didn't have very tight security in those days. It was still possible to walk through Downing Street as a shortcut from St. James's Park to Whitehall. Security at Downing Street remained lax until the 1980s, I believe, when Margaret Thatcher had it tightened up.

Each day I went in and out of the Red Lion Court office building on various errands. If I turned left from Keystone House and passed between the Harlequin record shop and the Golden Egg restaurant I was in Fleet Street and then it was left toward Blackfriars and Saint Paul's Cathedral or right towards The Strand.

If I turned right when coming out of Keystone House and headed in the Pemberton Row and Fetter Lane direction I had to pass under the scaffolding belonging to some builders. As the months went by and my hair got longer I drew more and more comments and wolf whistles from the builders. I'm not sure whether they knew I was a boy.

The journalists sent me regularly to the local newsstand to pick up copies of dodgy underground hippy publications like 'International Times' and 'Oz'. I would usually buy a copy of International Times (known as "IT") for myself too. "IT" was a surrealist newspaper. I recall five specific notable events which happened to me during those years.

The first of these events occurred when I was being sent repeatedly to some very dodgy addresses in Soho etc. and entering the realms of Greek Street, Dean Street, Wardour Street and Soho Square where I would receive press releases from some pretty dingy and run-down buildings which somehow seemed to be the homes of fabulous film and record companies who always had new films and pop singers to promote.

London has some very interesting psychogeography and history. It was on one of these occasions that I was approached by what appeared to be a middle-aged woman (or, possibly perhaps, a man in drag) wearing far too much makeup. She asked me if I had "the time". I, being an extremely naïve 17 year old, replied "No, I'm sorry, I don't have a watch" and pointed to my wrist.

Immediately, two plain clothes policemen emerged from one of those basement access areas which some old London buildings have hidden behind some cast iron railings and began to question me in a sarcastic manner. Only when they realised I was an underage boy did they permit me to go without an arrest. That gave me some idea of what the London police were like.

The second was when I was sent to collect something from a building called “Space House” in Kemble Street/Wild Street near Kingsway. I was in the habit of walking along reading a book when I went on these errands. I always had a book in my pocket, usually science fiction, and I would stroll along, reading and using only peripheral vision to avoid collisions. I had developed my peripheral vision to a high degree and was able to avoid people and lampposts without looking up, pretty much the way young people do in the 2020s with their mobile phones and their text messages. That was my superpower in those days.

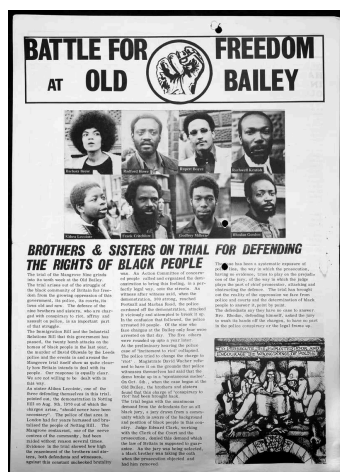
So I was walking from Fleet Street along The Strand towards The Aldwych and a large number of students from the London School of Economics were coming along in the opposite direction. They were all in the middle of the road waving protest banners. I don't know what they were protesting about. It might've been the atom bomb, or the war in Vietnam, or women's liberation, or gay liberation or whatever. I only had eyes for the book I was reading which was, very likely, an Asimov or a Clifford Simak or a Poul Anderson or something along those sort of lines.

Suddenly a police constable confronted me and told me to go in the road with all the other protestors and to go in the same direction as them. I explained that I wasn't a protester but the police constable refused to listen. He was determined that I would join the demo or be arrested as a trouble maker. We began to argue about my right to be nothing to do with his demonstration.

After a while his sergeant came over and joined in the argument. Then one of the protestors came over and joined in too. Eventually the two police officers figured out that I was an underage boy, I think I was still 16 when these events were occurring, and decided to allow me to continue on my way to collect my package or press release or whatever it was while they arrested the protester who had only come over to help. That was another example of what the London police were like at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s.

The third of these events was when I had to go over to Bouverie Street to the News of the World offices to collect a Rigsby cartoon or whatever and I was stopped by a police constable who asked whether I had seen a van of a particular description and registration number pass by that way.

To understand how this then developed into a problem it is necessary to add a bit of context.



I had read in the news of the ridiculous attack which had been committed by London police officers against the Notting Hill Carnival. The police had advanced toward the carnival in riot gear, beating their truncheons rhythmically against their riot shields.

The underground press was full of accounts of racial attacks by police on people for being black, or Asian, or gay or Irish, or for having long hair, or for nothing at all. These stories were too plentiful to be entirely fiction and seemed, in my mind, to be confirmed by the attitude of the officer who had wanted to arrest me for refusing to join a protest march which was nothing to do with me.

So, when asked to help the police by saying whether I had seen a vehicle of some description go by I refused to be of any help.

I stood on the principle that I was not in any way obligated to give help to a racist, fascist organisation, which is what I believed, at that time, the police to be. I was then told I was being arrested and, when I asked the constable what he was arresting me for he said "suspicion".

I asked "suspicion of what"?

He replied, with a sneer and an aggressive tone "Just suspicion".

I was physically lifted from the ground by two officers and put into a police vehicle and driven to a Snow Hill Police Station near the 'Old Bailey'. Snow Hill is an old police station situated between Newgate and Cock Lane and has a lot of history to it.

History, history, history.

We were in the area of the Old Bailey, of the old, historical, site of Newgate Prison, the area of the Snow Hill Tunnel, of Smithfield meat market and of the Cock Lane Ghost. The psychogeography there is tingling with strange history. Cock Lane is where the Great Fire of London stopped in its tracks. The Fire took place in 1666 and is known to have started in Pudding Lane and ended at Pye Corner. It was the "Puddin' and Pye" fire and is marked by the statue of the "Golden Boy" with the inscription "This Boy is in Memory Put up for the late FIRE of LONDON Occasion'd by the Sin of Gluttony 1666".

The police in that area are a separate force to the main Metropolitan London Police. They have their own separate traditions such as grabbing a suspect around the neck and physically lifting him above the ground for a moment or two in a theatrical performance of a hanging. A charming old custom designed to remind the suspect that villains get hanged (which they don't, of course, but history is what it was).

I was held in the police station, refusing to answer questions, until they used my library card to trace my employment address. Then my boss, Peter Gladwin, came over to sort the matter out.

They kept me in a cell with the door open and a middle-aged policeman sitting on a chair in the doorway. He kept trying to engage me in conversation and to wheedle out of me any

information, such as my age. I refused to reply to any of his questions though. He asked me if I thought “all this” was something to do with “what was happening in America”. I chuckled softly and wondered what he meant by “all this” or “what was happening in America”, but I said nothing. He suggested that I would be surprised to learn that people working in that very police station listened to the same kind of music I liked. I chuckled again because there was no way he could possibly know what kind of music I liked, especially the Tchaikovsky and the Glenn Miller and the György Ligeti on the soundtrack album of “2001: A Space Odyssey”.

Peter Gladwin arrived and did some kind of deal with the police to get me released. They wanted me to sign something but I refused. They said they couldn't release me unless I did sign and I replied that they would have to keep me locked up for ever and ever then.

They realised their bluff was called and released me without signing. I was pleased that the old, hard drinking, hard working newspaperman Peter Gladwin had taken my side of the argument, defending my right to say nothing, although I was disappointed that he had played their game and done some deal with them behind my back. I didn't know the details of what he'd said to them.

A few weeks later a representative from the City of London Police came to the News Ltd. offices and made an official apology to me. I ungraciously refused to accept and he was nonplussed. I don't think anyone had ever refused an apology before.

Obviously I was an arrogant little twit at 17. Nevertheless, what I had been saying about having the right to refuse their questions was still essentially true.

Not long after that the TV series “Dixon of Dock Green” mysteriously made an episode about a man who, being held in Dock Green police station, refuses to answer questions and tells the police officers that it is none of their business, the exact same words I said (over and over) when I was being held at Snow Hill.

This sort of thing is triggering to my Truman Show Syndrome.

At the end of the episode old George Dixon comes out to break the fourth wall as usual and comments that since the man was revealed at last to have broken no laws he was quite right to say it “was none of our business”.

“Evening all”.

The fourth of these events was when I was sent to the offices of “OZ” magazine to collect a press release about their obscenity trial.



It was a perfectly normal errand like any other and was part of my usual day-to-day job but I was a 17-year old boy and therefore technically a child and I was being sent to the offices of a subversive pornographic magazine to collect a press release.

A gang of journalists were hanging around outside the OZ offices waiting for any news. I went in through the front door and got the press release. When I emerged I was (technically) a long haired teenage boy, a seventeen year old, coming out of the office of the magazine which had published a “school kids” issue. So I was “in the frame” so to speak. Journalists began to ask me questions and I could only reply that I didn’t know anything. I told them the truth. I told them that I was only an office boy from Rupert Murdoch’s “News Ltd. of Australia” and that I was only collecting a press release. They ignored all of that and kept demanding that I give them the lowdown on the obscenity trial.

I pulled the old trick of pointing in one direction and then running in the other.

It worked and I escaped from them. I was only seventeen and I could run a lot faster than a bunch of fat old journalists.

The fifth of these events was when one of the Australian journalists working in the office at Keystone House began to make homosexual advances toward me.

His name was Mr. Leahy and he kept making up excuses to call me into his room in the office. He wanted coffee, he wanted a newspaper from the archives, he wanted to know who had phoned, he wanted to ask my opinion about things, he wanted "just to talk to me" and so on. Then his unwanted conversation turned to the topic of sexuality amongst young people in England. I knew nothing about that. I was a virgin seventeen year old.

After unsuccessfully trying to bully me into talking about sex Mr. Leahy attempted flattery, telling me that he found it difficult to believe that I didn't have a boyfriend because I was such a good looking boy. I replied that I wasn't homosexual and that I didn't like his tone. Then he tried to bully me again, implying that he could get me the sack. I said I would rather get the sack than have to tolerate his attempts at "chatting me up".

He said that he knew that I had been spending time with Mr. Gladwin at his home in the country (which was a complete and utter lie) and that he, Leahy, could make a lot of money by "running me in OZ".

I assume that what he meant by that was that he wanted to pimp me out as a boy prostitute in Australia.

It was then that I made my complaint to Jean Dwyer, the office manager and to Margaret Taylor, Mr. Gladwin's secretary.

Mr. Leahy was sacked.

I carried on working at News Ltd. until I reached the age of eighteen and then I left to begin my big adventure of "going to look for England" which I've written about elsewhere.